

The Gates Hearings: Were Intelligence

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In providing a rare public look at the inner-workings of a spy agency, the confirmation hearings of Robert M. Gates to head the CIA have raised questions about whether intelligence reports that Gates oversaw in the 1980s were tilted to support the Reagan administration's ideological aims.

While allegations about politicized intelligence have been leveled at various times over the life of the CIA, they were especially widespread during the Reagan administration because Gates's boss, CIA Director William J. Casey, had a definite political agenda and was a forceful policy advocate.

Casey, like President Ronald Reagan, was intent on rebuilding the reputation of the United States as a reliable and confident world power after the defeat in Vietnam and believed in doing so by pushing back communist aggression wherever he found it—from Central America to Afghanistan.

Gates, who holds a doctorate in Soviet and Russian history, shared Casey's hard-line views on the Soviet threat and thrived under his leadership. He was promoted by Casey in 1982 to run the CIA's intelligence directorate and in 1986 to be the agency's second-in-command—a job he held until 1989.

Lifting the veil on a number of intelligence reports prepared by Gates, senators have explored allegations that Gates slanted

intelligence on a range of topics, including the Soviet space defense program, Soviet influence in Iran and the Soviet Union's alleged role in the 1981 papal assassination attempt, all to please Casey and other policymakers.

Gates has defended his record, saying he and his analysts often presented policymakers with assessments they did not want to hear. CIA studies that showed a decline in Soviet defense spending, he said for example, made then-Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger unhappy. Secretary of State George P. Shultz, in another example, was dissatisfied when CIA reports painted a bleak picture of prospects for U.S. objectives in Lebanon in 1983.

"The reality is that, I think, intelligence does an honest job of reporting what it truly believes," Gates said. "But the belief that there is a problem [of bias] is important enough that it requires constant attention."

Just what bias looks like can itself be subject to dispute, as the senators showed last week in discussing a December 1984 memo from Gates to Casey about U.S. policy toward Nicaragua.

In the memo, Gates criticized the U.S. program of providing covert aid to the Nicaraguan contras, calling it a "half-hearted policy." Recalling failed U.S. efforts to confront Soviet challenges in Vietnam, Cuba and Angola, he contended that an overt campaign, including airstrikes, was needed

to bring down the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

To Sen. Howard M. Metzenbaum (D-Ohio), the memo's anti-Communist rhetoric made Gates appear like an "ardent cold warrior" who was "playing to Casey's prejudices." In fact, the senator said of the memo, "it sounds like it could have come right out of William Casey's mouth."

John C. Danforth (R-Mo.) offered a different reading, saying the memo was "probably not what a policymaker would want to

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hear" but did show—to Gates's credit—that he "calls them as he sees them."

Gates has long been critical of analysis that is wishy-washy and not useful for those who rely on it. He speaks from firsthand experience, having served on the National Security Council in the 1970s and, since 1989, as deputy national security adviser to President Bush. He told the senators last week that CIA analysis must be provocative and controversial and that intelligence an-

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analysts "ought to be right up close to the policymaker and know his worries."

The fear voiced by some is that Gates has such strong opinions that he would cross the line from analyst to advocate as CIA director. Although he promised last week to remain open to opposing views, there were allegations left unresolved that he had suppressed dissenting views in intelligence reports.

Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.), a member of the intelligence committee conducting the hearings, said in an interview Friday that a CIA director "has to be dedicated to the truth and the range of truths" that are frequently confronted. "The key thing is to make sure that a policymaker has accessible all of the range of possibilities, and that means that you've got to reward the ideosyncratic view; you can't penalize it," he said.

Gates was accused last week of doing that in the preparation of a 1985 intelligence estimate that saw a growing Soviet threat in Iran and that suggested allowing U.S. allies to sell arms to Iran to blunt that influence. The State Department's top intelligence official, Morton Abramowitz, disagreed at the time about the seriousness of the threat, and said his agency would insert a dissenting footnote.

Gates acknowledged under questioning from Bradley that he had called Abramowitz and "talked him out of the footnote."

"So that there was no alternative view presented?" Bradley asked.

"That is correct," Gates said, explaining that he had felt at the time the State Department's view "really didn't represent an alternative view."

The intelligence estimate later was used by the staff of the National Security Council to try to justify what became the secret sale in 1985 of U.S. arms to Iran—which actually was undertaken not to counter the Soviets but to win the release of some Western hostages held by pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon.

Abramowitz declined comment last week on Gates. But former State Department officials said none of them, including Abramowitz, knew at the time the Iran estimate was prepared that it would be used for other purposes.

In another 1985 case, according to information presented to the Senate intelligence committee, Gates also is alleged to have slanted an intelligence assessment of whether the Soviets had a role in the 1981 assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II. The study, which Gates commissioned to make the best-case argument for a Soviet role, has been portrayed by Gates as a balanced consensus. That and other allegations of slanted intelligence are to be taken up by the committee later this week in a closed-door session.

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In a third case, Bradley charged a 1986 speech by Gates was "a real piece of advocacy for SDI," the Strategic Defense Initiative advanced by the Reagan administration to develop a space-based defense against nuclear missiles. To show the feasibility of a space-based defense, Gates said in the speech that the Soviets would be testing ground-based lasers by the late 1980s and could begin testing components for a large-scale deployment in the 1990s of their own anti-missile system—none of which took place.

Bradley asked Gates why he "chose to emphasize the more alarming aspects of the intelligence information as opposed to the more reassuring aspects" of information about the Soviet Union's military program.

Gates responded that he had changed his view about the propriety of such speeches by a CIA chief. "I think that the DCI [director of central intelligence] should avoid giving substantive speeches, particularly those where there is a risk of the speech being misinterpreted as advocacy of a policy," he said.

"So you wouldn't do that again?" Bradley asked.

"No sir, I don't think I would," Gates replied.

Gates's supporters vouched for his objectivity. John N. McMahon, deputy director under Casey from 1982 to 1986 while Gates was running the CIA's analytical branch, could not recall any instance in which Gates had slanted intelligence to please policymakers.

There would be 2,000 analysts in the agency, McMahon testified, "who would be headed by Bob Gates, walking out the front door if they thought that the CIA was going to become a policy tool of any administration. . . . It goes to the very fiber of the intelligence process. Intelligence has to be impartial and call it what it is, whether the administrations like it or not."

McMahon cited two cases where Gates stood up to Casey's "pre-



ROBERT M. GATES
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ordained" position on intelligence estimates.

In one, McMahon said, Casey did not want U.S. technology to be used to help the Soviets build a natural gas pipeline to Western Europe in the early 1980s. But Gates's analytical branch produced an estimate that contradicted Casey. It said, according to McMahon, "The Soviets are going to build that pipeline whether you like it or not or whether you give them the equipment or not."

McMahon also cited a 1984 intelligence estimate about Mexico. "Bill Casey wanted that estimate to read that Mexico was falling apart and it was going to be a disaster down there," McMahon said. But "the intelligence we had, which had to come through Bob Gates, did not support that."

John Horton, the CIA official in charge of the Mexico estimate, later resigned and bitterly attacked Casey for trying to interfere. But Horton said in a recent interview that he had no problems with the role Gates played. "My quarrel was a quarrel with Casey," he said.

McMahon did express surprise, however, at Gates's 1984 Nicaragua memo urging U.S. bombing of the country. "I don't know what prompted Bob to do that," he said.

Gates has not been questioned about the memo, but eight days before it was written, Casey wrote to other top agency officials asking for their "best thinking" on a comprehensive approach "to the Nicaraguan problem," according to a copy of Casey's memo that was declassified during the 1987 congressional Iran-contra hearings.

"There are no purely objective people," said Richard N. Perle, who served as a senior Defense Department official in the Reagan administration. "There are degrees of rigor, and the real test is to what extent conclusions arise from the evidence, how clearly the evidence is presented and how carefully contrary evidence is adduced and explained. And on this I think Gates deserves very high points for rigor. If 'activist' means challenging the comfortable assumption that every intelligence organization tends to slip into, then you certainly want an activist."

If Gates is confirmed, he will be the first CIA analyst to assume the agency's top job. Retired Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, himself a former deputy director of the agency and a strong Gates backer, told the Senate committee that Gates's background as an analyst is one of his major qualifications for the director's post, particularly given the end of the Cold War and the fast pace of international change these days. But Inman also said the biggest challenge Gates is likely to have as CIA director will be simply to provide information and not try to drive U.S. policy.

"It's going to be keeping his mouth shut about telling the administration what they ought to do," Inman said. "When you've been on the side of shaping what the policies are, it's going to be hard to go back. But he understands that, he's committed to do it."